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ABSTRACT

"Text Sets" is a curricular strategy that highlights intertextuality, the process of searching for connections among reading texts and personal experiences. The strategy consists of gathering groups of related books and engaging small groups of students in a discussion of how the books interrelate. Three teachers assembled Text Sets for their third- and sixth-grade classrooms. Discussions ranged widely, allowing students to develop broader ranges of ideas. Fieldnotes were taken and literature discussions were audiotaped or videotaped. Several groups brainstormed lists or webs of possible comparisons or connections. Some groups physically sorted books, others listed characteristics and categorized them, while others divided up books by theme. Groups frequently focused upon connections involving: (1) elements of the story; (2) illustrations; (3) the lives of the authors or illustrators; (4) life experiences and previous texts; or (5) new experiences. After their discussions, the groups presented their findings to the rest of the class. Groups seemed to use the presentations for thinking through and presenting connections made, rather than presenting the books themselves. The Text Sets approach promoted student choice, both in selecting and responding to books. The social, dialogic nature of the activity promoted learning. Afterwards, students and teachers alike were more aware of the need for connections and ways of searching for them. (Sixteen references are attached.) (SG)

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INTERTEXTUALITY:

MAKING CONNECTIONS ACROSS LITERATURE AND LIFE

by

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Learning is a process of making connections, of searching for patterns that connect so that we can make sense of our world (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984). We learn something new when we are able to make connections between what we are currently experiencing and something we already know. When we make few or no connections, learning within these experiences is difficult and easily forgotten. On the other hand, if we stay too close to what we already know, we are not pushed as learners into new understandings. For any learner, the most productive learning situation is one where we stand within sight of what we already know as we push into new territory. Vygotsky (1978) argues that this zone of optimal learning is what we are able to learn with the support of other learners, not what we already are able to do alone.

In the classroom, teachers are currently looking for ways to support learners in making these connections between the new and the known. While the search for connections is a natural part of learning, students' experiences in schools have led many to <u>expect</u> fragmentation and lack of connection in what they are learning. Educators have responded to this fragmentation by emphasizing background experiences. Teachers are encouraged to ask students questions about their own experiences or provide some type of prior experience before students read. The problem with this focus on background experience is that the teacher provides connections for students instead of helping students develop strategies for making their own connections. The teacher (or the teacher' manual) does the critical thinking about meaning. Thus students often are forced into trying to make sense of someone else's thinking and connections (Short, 1985).

When the focus is on how to prepare readers for reading experiences, the reading event itself, as an experience, is overlooked. Educators forget that a reader can read one text to prepare for reading and understanding a second text (Crafton, 1981). Instead of focusing only on what readers have to do to get ready to read, educators need to consider what happens when readers read one text to facilitate their understanding of other, related texts.

Fragmentation also has occurred because traditional reading tests, instruction, and research have treated reading as an isolated instance, and comprehension as the act of understanding a single passage. This isolated

view of reading is so imbedded in how educators think that they disregard their own reading processes. Proficient readers understand as they read by connecting ideas to previous reading experiences (Hartman, 1990). In life, reading is an open transactive process, not a process of reading one text in isolation from life. Readers make multiple connections across texts, ideas, and experiences. These connections keep changing over time with each new experience and text.

Text Sets is a curricular strategy that highlights the process of searching for connections and using one book to facilitate understandings of other books and issues (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988). The strategy of Text Sets consists of gathering together a group of related books and engaging a small group of students in discussions about that set. Within the group, each student usually reads several books and shares these books with the rest of the group. Together they spend time exploring comparisons and connections across their books and lives. Readers are encouraged to first share their "lived through" aesthetic responses (Rosenblatt, 1978) with other readers and then to reflect on and analyze their responses and connections.

My interest in Text Sets grew out of classroom based research on literature circles where students met in small groups to read and dialogue about their personal responses and differing interpretations to literature (Short, 1986; Short & Pierce, 1990). While these literature circles typically involved the use of multiple copies of a single title for each group, some groups began using Text Sets (collections of conceptually related books) organized around a theme, author, genre, or topic. As students participated in these discussions, I noted interesting differences between their dialogue about Text Sets and shared pieces of literature. When the group read and discussed the same piece of literature, they had a shared experience and so tended to focus in depth on their different interpretations of that book. In contrast, their discussions of Text Sets involved more retellings and a search for connections across their books. Students searched widely across the books and their own experiences within and outside of school to look for connections and issues that cut across the books in their set. Text Sets highlighted intertextuality, the process of making meaning through connections across

present and past texts and life experiences (Beaugrande, 1980).

Beginning the Inquiry Process

To explore further the meaning making processes within the Text Set discussions, Gloria Kauffman, Kaylene Yoder, and I put together a number of Text Sets related to students' interests in their third and sixth grade classrooms. These sets were introduced to students who chose the group to which they wanted to belong. Fieldnotes were taken as they read, discussed, and presented their sets to the class, and the literature discussions were either audio or videotaped. We also collected charts, webs, literature log entries, and any other written artifacts produced during the discussions.

Gloria and Kaylene were involved with me in designing, implementing, and completing the initial analysis of the study. We were interested in exploring the type of dialogue which occurred in Text Set discussions and how Text Sets facilitated children's search for connections in meaning making. We also wanted to examine the kinds of strategies children used to support their search for connections across literature and life and the kinds of intertextual connections they made during this search.

Gloria, Kaylene, and I functioned as researcher teachers during the study. There were always two of us present in the classroom during the discussions so that one person could take field notes and record the groups while the other interacted with students in discussion groups. The three of us completed an initial analysis of the data through the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). After I had further defined and refined the categories, Gloria and Kaylene responded to the analysis and we made needed changes.

The Text Sets used in this study were developed by brainstorming possible topics for the sets with the children. The different sets were not connected to each other by a broad theme because we wanted to explore a wide variety of types of sets. We then pulled together sets that had a range of kinds of literature and reading materials, levels of difficulty, and perspectives on the topic of the set. Students signed up the group they wanted to join and started exploring their set. Each group contained 4-5 students. The Text Sets read and discussed by the groups were:

Text Sets in Third Grade:

1. Magic Pot Set - folktales with the motif of a magic pot which provides the owner with wealth and/or food
2. Pig Set - fictional picture books, poetry, and information books with pigs as the main character
3. Eric Carle Set - author set of his picture books
4. Anne McGovern Set - author set of her informational books
5. Caldecott Set - picture books which won the Caldecott Medal

Text Sets in Sixth Grade:

1. Betsy Byars Set - author set of her realistic fiction books
2. Chris Van Allsburg Set - author set of his picture books
3. Japanese Set - folklore, poetry, informational books on Japan
4. Dragon Set - legends and folklore on dragons
5. Plains Indians Set - legends and historical information books
6. War and Peace Set - fictional and informational picture books dealing with the theme of war and living at peace with others
7. Cinderella Set - cultural variants from around the world

All of the sets except for the Betsy Byars set consisted of different kinds of picture books. Most contained a variety of genres as in the pig set which contained poetry, folklore, informational books, fantasy, and informational brochures from the Pork Society. Sets also contained materials written at different levels of difficulty and varying in background and topic familiarity for the students.

While the students in these two classrooms had been involved in many Literature Circles in their classrooms, they had not previously used Text Sets. To get them started, we suggested that they each read one or two books within their sets. The groups then came together and students shared their books with each other, continued reading other books in the sets, and began to compare and contrast their books. As students continued discussing their sets, differences in dialogue across the groups became apparent. These differences were not influenced by grade level but by the readers' background experiences, the focus of the specific set, the types of connections explored, and the strategies used by the group to read and compare their books.

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT A SEARCH FOR CONNECTIONS

As the groups began to talk and explore, they faced the problem of finding ways to deal with a set of different books and an overload of responses, ideas, and information. Each group found strategies that seemed to fit their members and the type of set with which they were dealing. These strategies included different ways for handling how the books were read, shared, and compared. Groups also explored strategies for focusing the discussions on particular connections to be explored in depth by the group.

To facilitate the development and awareness of these strategies, a short sharing time often was held after students had met in their literature circles. We encouraged them to share the strategies they were using in their groups, pointed out strategies we had seen groups using, and together brainstormed other ideas for handling the discussions and comparisons.

STRATEGIES FOR READING, SHARING, AND COMPARING BOOKS

The first differences that emerged across groups concerned the number of books read by group members and how the groups handled the initial sharing and comparing of books. As students began reading books in the sets, they were encouraged to write about their initial aesthetic responses to their books in literature logs. The first group discussions were sharing sessions as students talked about the books and their responses with each other. These discussions were not focused on analysis or comparison but enjoyment of literature. Groups differed, however, in how they continued the reading and discussing of connections across their books.

In some groups, students became experts on one or two books. Each day the group would discuss in depth a particular connection they saw across their books. Then each group member would relate that connection to the book on which they were the authority. Often group members had read several other books in the set but during discussions they primarily referred to the one or two books which they had read first. They were considered the "experts" on these books. When the Magic Pot group discussed the ways in which the pot was magic, each person described how the pot was magic in their specific book. As a group, they then looked for similarities and differences across their books based on their sharing. Group members had to collaboratively build connections and really listen to each other because of the limited knowledge each group member had of the other books in the set.

In other groups, group members became interested in other books and continued reading throughout the discussions as a result of the initial sharing of books. By the end of their discussions, they had read most or all of the books in the set. Instead of talking about a particular part of one book in their group discussions, individual members talked about several books in comparison to each other. Their initial discussions focused on sharing

connections rather than group members sharing and retelling stories. When the Cinderella group discussed stepsisters, each group member had already made a list of connections in their literature logs because they each were familiar with most of the books. Their discussions consisted of sharing and then comparing their connections across the books as they listened to each other's insights. Groups collaboratively used these insights to further develop the connections.

The group that discussed the war and peace books developed a different strategy. After several days, they decided to all read and discuss only one book from the set each day. Their books consisted of picture books which dealt with difficult issues related to war and peace and they needed the collaborative reading and discussion of one book at a time. As they read and discussed each book separately, they made connections back to previous books but these connections were not the main focus of their discussions as was true in the other groups. This group primarily focused on their personal connections and aesthetic responses to each book. They were not ready to go beyond those responses to analyzing their responses.

Another group, the Japan group, divided their books into subsets and dealt with one subset a day. They used genre as the deciding factor and broke their books into poetry, information books, folklore, and "other." Each day, group members read different books from one particular subset and then discussed the books and looked for connections within the subset. Near the end of their discussions, they began to connect these subsets to the broader topic of Japanese culture.

During their first discussions, the groups tended to spend the majority of time sharing and retelling. Because each person had read a different text, they all had something to share and they had real reasons for retelling their book to someone else. In most classrooms, students are asked to give retellings to others who already know the book and so they view the retelling as an exercise or quiz to see if they read the book. In the Text Set discussions, students knew that most of the others had not read the book and needed to understand it to make comparisons. Their retellings thus did not focus on efferent responses of giving information but took the form of sharing

their enjoyment of the story with someone who has not yet read the book. This type of sharing frequently led to children grabbing books they wanted to read before the next group meeting. In addition, students often started making comparisons during the retellings as they saw similarities between the book being shared and the book they had read. Many of the conversations freely moved back and forth between retellings and comparisons.

STRATEGIES FOR FOCUSING ON CONNECTIONS

Initially, the discussions on the Text Sets ranged across a wide variety of topics and tended to be unfocused. Many ideas were "mentioned" but not explored in depth by the group. To an adult, these conversations might appear to be unproductive because they often consisted of false starts and rambling comments without anyone developing or building on those ideas. These discussions, however, allowed readers to draw first on their feelings for a book and to enjoy participating in another's vision of the world. The students' primary concern was not to analyze the books but to talk about what the books meant to them and share their own "lived through" experiences with those books (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Having time to explore broadly without focusing the discussion also seemed to be critical in helping students develop a broader range of ideas to be considered by the group and to find the issues that most interested them for in depth discussion. Gradually each of the groups developed different ways to focus their discussions so that they could dialogue together about topics or issues in common to their set of books. Most of the groups used a specific strategy such as a web or list of possible comparisons, literature log entries, or the physical sorting of books to help them focus their discussions and connections.

Several groups brainstormed a list or web of possible comparisons and connections. One group brainstormed a list of questions about their set. These lists represented the range of connections, similarities, and differences that they might discuss. The groups then chose what they wanted to discuss each day from this list. Not everything on the list was discussed and new topics arose but the brainstorming gave them a sense of what they could focus on in their discussions. The Betsy Byars group used this

brainstorming strategy. Each group member read a different chapter book by Byars. After sharing their books with each other, they brainstormed a list of similar characteristics across their books. Their list contained topics such as "the kinds of problems kids have, types of solutions to kids' problems, enemies that cause problems, parents who are a problem, endings where things are better but not perfect, kids having adventures, and stories about everyday life." At the end of each day's discussion, the group would decide what they wanted to discuss from their list the following day and group members prepared for their next discussion by thinking about the topic, rereading in their books, and/or writing about the topic in their journals.

Another strategy used by groups was to physically sort books. The Cinderella group frequently sorted their books into different piles as they discussed the different kinds of princes, the ball or festival, how Cinderella was illustrated, or the endings. The Caldecott group spent several days putting pairs of books together that they saw as related in some way. From these pairings, they went on to stack the books to develop their own broad categories for what they believed made a book a Caldecott Medal winner.

Many of the groups used different kinds of category systems or lists of characteristics as they focused their discussions. The relationship between broad categories and specific lists of characteristics was interesting to trace within the groups. Some groups began with broad categories and then listed characteristics from their different books. The Dragon group came up with several different category systems within which they searched for characteristics. They looked at categories for types of dragons (cartoon, real, and fairytale) and the category of dragon as compared to dinosaur. Within these categories, they spent time listing characteristics from the different books they were reading.

Other groups listed characteristics and then sorted these characteristics into categories. The Caldecott group made lists of the characteristics of their books and then sorted these into five main categories which they saw as representing their major criteria for a book winning the award. These categories included illustrations (bright colors, action, imagination, etc.), characters (people, animals, birds, etc.), writing (details, title, exciting

action, unusual words, etc.), solving problems (running away, thinking, asking for help, etc.), and how the book related to other books (kind of characters, use of borders, type of illustrations, etc.).

Other groups did not focus on categories or characteristics but explored a theme or question which cut across their books. Sometimes these groups began with a broad insight or theme which focused their entire discussion while other times, they began by listing many smaller details which gradually led to a broad insight. The Pig group focused their discussions on the question of why authors use pigs as main characters so frequently in their books. "What is it about pigs?" they asked. They discussed reasons such as that pigs are more popular and cute than people, they are funnier and look better, they make a book more exciting and fun, and that an author can write about pigs without hurting anyone's feelings which might happen when they write about people.

On the other hand, the Chris Van Allsburg group spent a great deal of time pouring over his pictures looking for anything which he used in several books such as a specific boy, dog, chair, wallcovering, or style of porch. They began to wonder about his life so we added several articles on Van Allsburg to their set. Their focus on details then moved to a larger perspective as they considered these details in relation to his life and home and how his life influences his illustrating.

In examining the discussions, we found that often there was a particular book which caused the group to take another perspective on their topic. This book was usually one that did not seem to quite fit with the rest of the books in the set and so the group was forced into reconsidering the connections they were making in their set. The Funny Little Woman (Mosel, 1972) in the Magic Pot set raised questions because it was the one book in which there was no pot, only a spoon. Emma's Dragon Hunt (Stock, 1984) in which a modern Chinese child hunts for dragons with her grandfather raised the issue of whether dragons were real and not just part of legends. Yeh Shen (Louie, 1982), a Chinese variant of Cinderella, was an older tale than the more familiar French variant and this raised many questions about the story's origin and how it spread. Bang, Bang, You're Dead (Fitzhugh, 1969) brought the issue of war

into the everyday lives of the boys reading the War and Peace books. When the McGovern group listened to the tape of Anne McGovern discussing her work, they reread her books and then listened several more times to the tape as they discussed her books in more depth. In each case, these texts caused the group to rethink the connections they had been making and often resulted in the group making more complex connections across the books and their lives which in turn gave them a new perspective on the set and the issues being discussed.

In other experiences with Text Sets, groups have used tools such as comparison charts and time lines to help them organize and think through their connections. These tools, however, work best when used after a group has had time just to talk and share their responses with each other. In one instance, a folktale group moved to a comparison chart too early in the process and their discussion became an efferent focus on details and filling in the blanks on the chart instead of a dialogue among readers. Students need the range of the possible before they begin organizing their connections. Then, whether they focus on a question, theme, characteristic, category, or book, they still consider these within the broader framework of their set. Readers need the support of discussion strategies that encourage them to explore broadly as well as to focus on specific intertextual connections.

EXPLORING INTERTEXTUAL CONNECTIONS

Just as the groups varied in how they went about searching for connections, there were interesting differences in what they discussed and the types of connections they made across texts and with their experiences. Intertextual connections that were frequently discussed were characters, themes, plot, illustrations, the response of the reader, the life of the author, and their own experiences.

CONNECTIONS TO ELEMENTS OF THE STORY

The groups frequently discussed connections to particular kinds of characters, plot elements, and themes across their books. The pig group focused on the character of pigs in books. The McGovern book focused on genre and theme. The Byars group looked closely at character and plot. The War and Peace group discussed symbolism in their books and how this symbolism related to larger themes about the impact of war on ordinary people's lives. They

particularly talked about how innocent people and animals suffer in war. Sometimes the group focused on looking for connections across all literary elements to define what books fell within a particular set. The Magic Pot group spent their time figuring out the kind of plot, characters, and themes that made a book a "magic pot" book as compared to other folktales.

While groups often discussed literary elements such as character and theme, they considered these in terms of the impact on the reader and decisions by the author. The Pig group looked closely at the character of pigs, but they did so from the perspective of why authors and illustrators choose them and why readers like to have pigs in books. The McGovern group spent the majority of their time talking about why they thought McGovern wrote about the theme of danger and how the concept of danger related to their lives as readers. They also talked about her decision to write information books and the reasons why they found certain kinds of genres easier or more difficult in their own writing.

CONNECTIONS TO ILLUSTRATIONS

Illustrations frequently came up as a topic of discussion as students made connections across illustrations, between illustrations and the text, and to the illustrator or readers. The Caldecott group discussed how illustrations and printed text work together in a story. They decided that it was impossible to give the award for just the illustrations without also considering the printed text. The Cinderella group spent a day discussing the way Cinderella was portrayed in the illustrations. They considered the illustrations so important to the story that they decided to draw their own illustrations of Cinderella for several short stories which had none. Illustrations became important to the Dragon group as a source of information about their hypothesis that dragon legends came from dinosaurs. They used the illustrations to list the physical characteristics of dragons and dinosaurs.

The Eric Carle group focused their discussions on why Eric Carle's books appealed to so many age levels. They were especially interested in the ways he engaged readers through his unusual formats and the bright colors of his illustrations. Other groups did not focus specifically on the illustrations in their discussions but used the illustrations as part of the story context

for the comparisons they were discussing.

CONNECTIONS TO THE LIVES OF AUTHORS AND ILLUSTRATORS

The discussions on Text Sets based around authors and illustrators evolved naturally into an interest in the author and the relationship of authors' lives to the books they wrote and illustrated. Information on their lives was made available as the groups expressed interest. The McGovern group used a taped interview of McGovern to help them make connections between her life and her books. The Van Allsburg group focused on the details of his life and the items and people in his environment that they felt he continuously pulled from in illustrating his books. Only the Byars group showed little interest in the authors' life, perhaps because they found the connections to their own life experiences more productive to explore.

The groups tended to focus on the authors and illustrators in relation to the children's own lives as readers and writers. The Eric Carle group focused on the impact of his books on readers and the different ways in which readers of different age levels use his books for a variety of insights. As noted earlier, the Pig group discussed their response as readers and authors to the use of pigs in books. Groups often talked about why they felt authors or illustrators had made particular choices and the impact that decision had on them as readers. They also made connections to their writing and how they make similar decisions or had gained new writing and illustrating strategies.

CONNECTIONS TO LIFE EXERIENCES AND PREVIOUS TEXTS

Children's own life experiences were brought into the discussions as children saw them relating to the issues or connections being considered. The Byars group was one group that focused primarily on connecting their personal experiences to the books they were reading. They felt a close connection between their lives and the kinds of problems with parents and friends faced by characters in Byars' books. Several of the children in the Pig group came from farms and used their experiences with pigs in helping the group compare real pigs with the talking pigs used in many stories. The McGovern group had a long discussion on their personal definitions of danger and their control over whether or not situations in their lives become dangerous.

Readers' past life experiences also involve literary experiences with

books. The Magic Pot group brought in other folktales which had similar characters or plot elements. The Pig group often made connections to Charlotte's Web (White, 1952) which had been read aloud to them earlier that year. The Cinderella group used their past experience with the Disney movie and book as the basis for all of their comparisons of their books. The literature children used for comparisons included their own writing and published books. One of the girls in the Magic Pot book had written a book in which a family went from poor to rich and this book was often referred to in the group's discussions.

CONNECTIONS TO NEW EXPERIENCES

Sometimes groups realized that they needed to do additional research beyond the books in their set and their own experiences to build the background knowledge they needed to understand their Text Set or to explore particular issues. When the Dragon group began debating whether dragons were real, fantasy, or legends based on dinosaurs, they checked out many books on dinosaurs. The Eric Carle group found they needed more information to answer their questions about why his books appeal to so many age levels and so they went to various classrooms and interviewed children and adults about why they liked Eric Carle books. The War and Peace group checked out additional books on World War II. The Plains Indians group read informational books and encyclopedias to find out more about how different tribes of Plains Indians communicated with each other.

What a particular group discussed was impacted, of course, by the type of set which we had put together. It makes sense that the Eric Carle group focused on him as an illustrator or that the Cinderella group focused on how the different variants were alike and different. While the type of set highlighted a certain category of connections, the specific connections made by a group varied because of the past experiences with life and literature that each member brought to the group and because of the strategies the group chose to use to deal with their set. The War and Peace group had a different type of discussion because of their decision to look at one book at a time. The focus of the Eric Carle group on reader appeal grew out of their interactions with a visiting adult who commented on how much she liked his

books. The Dragon group focused on legend and fact because one group member's experiences led him to believe in the possibility that dragons are real.

PRESENTING INTERTEXTUAL CONNECTIONS TO OTHERS

The content focus of the different groups was highlighted as they finished their discussions and began to think about what they wanted to share with the rest of the class. Most of the groups spent around two weeks reading and discussing their books before moving into working on presentations. Some groups took only a day or two to prepare and give their presentations while other groups worked on their presentations for a week. As each group finished, they gave their presentation and then went back to free choice, independent reading while the other groups continued working.

When a group was ready to work on a presentation, we asked them to first think as a group about what they wanted the class to understand about their set and the ideas and connections they had discussed. They then brainstormed different ways they might be able to present those understandings effectively to others. Students had previously done presentations as part of other literature groups and so they had many ideas of ways to present. Because the students valued the ideas and connections they had developed with each other, they worked hard to create ways to communicate some of these to other class members. During their work on these presentations, new ideas often were introduced and previous connections were considered from a new perspective. Students faced the task of conveying ideas discussed in language through another communication system such as art or drama and so they had to reconsider those ideas and what they wanted to communicate (Siegel, 1984).

Most of the groups focused on the intertextual connections which they had made through their dialogue with each other rather than on presenting the books themselves. They seemed to use the presentations as a place to think through and present the connections that had been most central to their group process. The Magic Pot group took the characteristics of magic pot stories which they had developed in their discussions and presented their own original magic pot story through drama. In contrast, the Cinderella group wanted others to see the differences across cultures in their stories. They wrote a reader's theatre in which one of the group members began reading the Disney

variant and as she read she was constantly interrupted by others who told her she had the story wrong. Each person would interrupt to give her variant of Cinderella's name or where she went only to be interrupted by another person.

The author groups combined their understandings of the author and the books in their presentations. The Eric Carle group took the information they had gathered through interviews and presented a radio show in which they role played children and adults of different ages being interviewed about their responses to Eric Carle's books. The Anne McGovern group felt that their author was being ignored by other class members and deserved more popularity. They created posters about the characters in her books, the theme of danger, and information on Anne and the places she wrote about. They wore these as sandwich advertisement boards and paraded up and down the classroom. The Chris Van Allsburg group made a house mural of what they thought his house must look like based on his illustrations and their reading about his life.

Several groups planned experiences so that the class would be actively involved in thinking about some of the issues with them and making their own connections. The Caldecott group developed a learning center where they listed their five categories and had class members sort Caldecott books based on those criteria. The War and Peace group presented a skit about the effects of war and engaged the class in a discussion about war and living at peace with others. The Pig group brought a real pig to the classroom for the morning and had class members take observational notes which they later compared to the pigs presented in literature. The Betsy Byars group wrote "Dear Abby" letters about the problems of their main characters. They posted the letters on a board for class members to respond by giving advice on how to deal with that problem. The Native American group involved the class in several experiences using communication systems developed by Plains Indians. The Dragon group made a poster about dragons and one about dinosaurs. After presenting these, they asked classmates whether they thought the legends of dragons could be based on dinosaurs. The Japanese group borrowed nature slides and showed the slides as they read their favorite haiku poetry and served class members tea.

These presentations were well received by class members and students

spend the next several weeks reading widely from books in other sets. What impressed us as teachers was the way these presentations reflected the discussions in the groups and the intertextual connections which had been most influential in their thinking about their sets. The process of thinking through and putting on the presentations seemed to help the groups step back and pull together what had been most significant about their experiences with the set. Their presentations were not just plot summaries or surface connections between the books. Rather, they were thoughtful presentations of critical intertexual connections which emerged from their dialogue.

AN ENVIRONMENT THAT SUPPORTS CHOICE AND STRATEGIES FOR LEARNING

In reflecting on this experience as educators, there were a number of implications for classroom learning environments that emerged. The role of choice and purpose in learning was especially evident. Students were given many choices as participants in these discussions. They had input into the choice of topics for the sets. They had choices in which group they wanted to join, which books to read within the group, the strategies they used within their groups for reading and discussing their books, and the connections they discussed in depth. These choices helped them to feel a sense of ownership and responsibility in the group process because the decisions were not forced upon them. Because they were the ones making the decisions, they took more active roles.

Having choices in the content and process of the reading and group discussions allowed students to more easily connect with their own life experiences. Students had the choice of what books to read from their sets, and so they could choose books in which they had a greater interest and background for the topic and which were at a comfortable level of difficulty. Because these students saw themselves as active readers and writers, they drew from their life experiences as they searched for connections and discussed authors and elements of stories. They did not consider literature in isolation from themselves but always in connection with themselves, the world, and other literature in that world.

The brainstorming and discussion of connections came from the students. They chose how to respond. Thus they could respond in ways that connected

with their own thinking rather than trying to figure out how the teacher wanted them to connect. The result was a much greater diversity of strategies and connections than if we as teachers had tightly controlled the process.

While there was a great deal of choice and student involvement in this strategy, there was also a supportive structure within which students made those choices. As teachers, we had responsibility for establishing broad structures which would support the students in their decision making. We established a process for choosing topics for the sets, signing up for the groups, getting the groups started with reading and discussing, suggesting strategies they might use in their groups, having a reflection time when groups could share their strategies with each other, and providing materials and time for presentations. Often we joined groups during brainstorming and suggested additional ideas and connections that the group might consider in their discussions. Some groups invited us to join them because they were having difficulty, either with the group dynamics or with a particular issue.

As teachers, we were a resource and had a definite influence on the groups but we were not the sole determinant of the direction of the group. We suggested, for example, the strategy of reading several books, sharing those books, and then brainstorming some possible topics for comparison. This suggestion supported the groups in beginning their discussions but allowed them plenty of room for developing their own strategies to support the discussions. We did not expect the diversity of strategies that emerged from these groups and were, in fact, quite surprised by what the groups developed. The structures we developed gave students the support they needed to make choices. Without that support, there would have been confusion. But with restrictive structures, there would have been passivity and sameness. We continuously struggled with creating structures that supported choice so that we could build curriculum collaboratively with students.

Another key construct was the social nature of learning and the power of dialogue in changing the thinking of learners. The Text Sets highlighted the contributions of each member of the group dialogue. Since each person had read something different from others in the group, each had something unique to contribute to the group process. Students were valued regardless of their

reading proficiency or life experiences because they each had something to offer. The group had to work hard at dialogue, at critically listening and building from what others had to say, as they searched for connections that would bring new understandings about their set. Through their interactions with each other and the books in their set, they considered new perspectives and intertextual connections.

This experience with Text Sets allowed us as teachers to see how we could provide experiences in the classroom which highlight important learning strategies in ways that are meaningful for students. In their discussions, students were involved with ideas and connections that were meaningful and important to them. They were not engaged in a lesson to practice making connections. Because the search for connections was essential to their discussions of these sets, it was natural that the class spend time sharing their strategies for making these connections. In later experiences, we realized that the connection making process was enhanced if the different Text Set groups all related to a broader theme such as change or culture. When this broader theme was present, teachers could carefully choose read aloud books to provide a broader context for discussions and connections. The groups also did more informal sharing with each other during the discussions.

These strategies and the focus on searching for connections became a conscious part of how students and teachers thought in other situations. We specifically noticed students making a more conscious search for connections in later discussions and bringing in broader connections when the group all had read the same book. We also observed them using some of the strategies developed during the Text Set discussions in math and science experiences where they were working with large amounts of data.

What students first experienced through dialogue with others became part of the thinking they brought to later experiences. The focus on learning as a search for connections was a general perspective they began to bring to a variety of learning situations in their classrooms. They were more aware of the need for connections and the ways they could go about searching for these connections. Instead of passively responding to the ideas of powerful others, these learners were actively and critically searching to make sense of their

worlds and their own learning processes. They were part of a strong community of learners focused on creating these understandings together.

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